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The EU “live” in Civic Education: To Experience and Understand the European Union *in-situ*. A model for and experiences from political excursions and thematic seminars to and in Brussels

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ABSTRACT

Political Excursions to Brussels on EU matters can be a very effective and important methods and format of civic education. Based on experience from practice, this can be the case in particular if they are conceived of, organised and implemented as *in-situ* seminars, which has been practised in over 40 seminars since 2004. The format we advocate and demonstrate here, with an early qualitative evaluation based on the literature and contrast to other practices and models, is one of an exemplary (by policy field), multi-perspective (different key institutions, players, actors and preferable nationalities on inputting participants or at least experts) approach which is conducted *in-situ*. This is, however, resource and planning intensive, and requires quite a high degree of experience and expertise, and is not a model which can be taken to a mass-produced regular repeat delivery. The learning and engagement of voluntary participants in non-formal education, in addition to (though at times in partnership with) formal education institutions - such as secondary schools or universities – is very significant and has been shown and evaluated to be of a high level of quality with significant nation-wide appeal in Germany and of staying power in the market for civic education. We also reflect on how this approach may be a basis for genuinely trans-national non-formal civic education in Europe on EU matters.

Key Words:

civic education on European Union, *in-situ* seminars, political excursion, triangulation, multi-perspective approach, thematic and institutional depth

Introduction

Much or most of the time, both formal and non-formal civic education takes the form of instruction in the class room, lecture theatre and / or textbooks or literature where students are meant to absorb receptively, passively, and from

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a distance. We are proposing here a model, developed and tested over a range of seminars in the past few years *in situ* in Brussels, that offers an intensive contrast to the above scenario to conduct European Union (institutions and policy-)focussed civic education in the form of a political study excursion. We do so, however, in some marked contrast to other models of political study excursion which are currently practiced in the main, are described in available literature, and are on the market in the main.

1.The Benefits of political study excursions

With a political study excursion to the European Union institutions directly, this offers the chance for direct impressions and engagement, and thus learning access to what has been described as a dry, cumbersome, complex and seemingly non-transparent topic (Bickerton, 2016; Stratenschulte, 2015a; Goll, 2015; Böhme, 2009; Oberle, ed, 2015a; Detjen, 2004a; Rappenglück, 2004; Weißeno, 2004; Windwehr & Windwehr, 2011; Weidenfeld, 2008; Pinder & Usherwood, 2013). Instead of an overall and systematic treatment from a distance, civic education participants come into direct contact with representatives of central European Union institutions and thus European policy makers (see e.g. Große Hüttmann & Wehling, 2013; Weidenfeld, 2013). For both civic education and higher education, it has been argued that place matters, and that localising pedagogies are important in the context of community engagement, with service teaching advocated as one strategy (MacLabhrainn & McIlrath, eds, 2007).

There has also been a growing approach of role plays and simulations in civic education, including on European themes at all educational levels and increasingly also thematically-focussed (Hartmann & Weber, 2013; Gretchen & Van Dyke, 2014; Dierßen & Rappenglück, 2015; Raiser & Warkalla, 2015; Van Dyke, DeClair & Loedel, 2000; Müller, 2004; Rappenglück, 2008; Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg, 2015). Muno & Prinz (2015) have done so with a focus on regulations in the policy-making process simultaneously with university students, and Brunazzo & Settembri (2015) by simulating the European Council's negotiations on the European's Citizenship Initiative innovation of the Lisbon Treaty for university students. Zeff (2003) did so by developing an in-class simulation with separate sessions covering different issues to model negotiations in the European Council to teach the complex processes of policy making and negotiations in the EU where

institutional procedures are difficult to understand and where intergovernmental and supranational issues often conflict. Jones & Bursens (2014) present an encouraging constructivist-learning framework evaluation of a large-scale transatlantic EuroSim simulation of EU policy making.

At school level, for instance, the Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg offers „Political Days“ as an addition to the normal curriculum in class for all higher school forms to promote an engagement with political issues and to provide some impulses for civic and political engagement, as well as to extend methodological competences and social learning. This offers opportunities for group work and to learn from experts on a particular chosen topic. In the school year 2016-7 role plays and actions days on topical themes such as democracy, EU and Europe, refugee politics, globalisation, sustainability and communal politics are offered, with special playful formats for primary schools. A particular focus in this school year is elections, with special formats for the German Federal election in 2017, as well as a Europe-week on the EU and Europe at the beginning of May 2017 around the Europe Day on the 9th of May. Europe-political role plays / simulations are also offered (https://www.lpb-bw.de/politische_tage.html).

The European Youth Parliament (EYP), in autumn 2016 to guest in Menden in southern Westphalia with support of the business community there, is also a commendable platform initiative to promote political debate and intercultural exchange of young people in Europe with 40 participating countries. The EYP is reaching more than 22,000 pupils by entirely voluntary work by pupils and students. The annual session simulated the work of the European parliament over seven days in committees and workshops with ca. 150 participants (Industrie- und Handelskammer Südwestfalen, 2016).

Furthermore, there is some emphasis placed in political science, International Relations and European Studies with regard to innovative teaching styles and blended learning, which does incorporate simulations to an extent but also active learning, problem-based learning, distance learning and social media (e.g. Baroncelli, Farmeti, Horga & Vanhoonacker, eds, 2014; Timus, Cebotari, & Hosein, 2016; Guasti, Muno & Nieman, 2015). Student mobility within Europe through exchange programmes for students and other learners, such as Erasmus (old style for higher education) and now Erasmus + (now incorporating previous programmes for further and vocation education such as Comenius and Leonardo can be assessed as a civic experience (Mitchell, 2012). The very competitive EU internship process at the EU institutions for graduate students who have completed a university degree in the EU or an official candidate country for accession is also worth pointing out here (European Union, 2017). For non-European students there are some EU study tours and internship

programs, such as those organised with Canadian universities (Laval & Berlin, 2014).

2.Short overview of developments in EU-focussed civic education

We are considerably short of a European education space, which we can perhaps imagine for the future to a degree (Lawn, 2002).

2.1. The landscape of EU-focussed civic education at present

Elken (2015) discusses the new EU instruments for Education with vertical, horizontal and internal tensions in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) introduced in 2008, but assesses it as an overall success in terms of “widening EU capacity for joint coordination through an informal widening of the subsidiarity principle and opportunities for diffusing EU preferences” (p.70). Elken concludes from her “analysis of the horizontal coordination processes” that whilst there is still some fragmentation in terms of coordinating the EQF across relevant sectors emerging coordination can nonetheless be identified in some areas, with internal tensions related to the nature of the instrument covering all levels and types of education. Elken argues that though internal tensions remain “the EQF has facilitated the development of a new arena for discussing policy coordination (EQFAG) that can, in the long run, reduce these tensions.” Elken sees the EQF overall, despite uneven impact so far and implementation proceeding with various speed as “a successful case of a particular Commission policy preference that has been gaining widespread acceptance across Europe in an area where coordination previously had been met with resistance.” (p. 70)

A recent report for the European Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education (European Parliament, 2016) on ‘Learning EU at school’ argues that whilst a majority of Member States have integrated an EU dimension into their curriculum this is uneven and fragmented, too general and not progressive enough and with a lack of consistency and complementarity with other subject taught and in those that have done so. More could be done, for instance, with regard to curricula, teacher training, textbooks and teaching methods. This is argued to make it difficult for learners to build a comprehensive picture of the EU. “Given its impact on citizens’ everyday life, the EU should be more visible in teaching materials, at all levels and in all forms of education” [and] special attention should be paid to the vocational education and training sector. The report argues that teacher training, both initial and in-service training, needs to “systematically prepare educators to teach about the EU and the values on which it is founded, both in theory and in practice. Textbooks should guarantee a

broader coverage of EU-related topics and at the same time be better adapted to the particular age groups, taking into account students' interests. Teaching methods used in the classroom should give students responsibility for their own learning, use interactive methods and external stimuli and examples of how the EU is relevant to students' every-day lives." (p. 14). The report also recommends that "Member States recognise and facilitate the role played by social partners and civil society organisations in bridging the gap between the EU and its citizens." (p. 15). According to a study called 'Learning Europe at school', prepared by private consultancy ICF GHK for DG Education and Culture, it is primarily institutions and associations outside of higher education that are involved in delivering teacher education on EU issues (European Parliament, 2016, p. 5; ICF-GHK, 2013). Ross (2008, 2007, 2006, 2002, 2000) has produced serious work on both trainee teachers but also adolescents and children in terms of teaching and learning citizenship education within Europe, and education for citizenship, democracy and identity within the context of Europe, and with co-authors also political learning within Europe (Roland-Levy & Ross, eds, 2003; Papoulia-Tzelepi, Hegstrup & Ross, eds 2005; Fulop & Ross eds 2005; Kryzywosz-Rynkiewicz & Ross, eds, 2004; Näsman & Ross, eds 2002). A recent training pack for teachers across Europe, "Living with Controversy", to assist in preparing for teaching controversial issues through citizenship education and other curriculum areas developed by a range of European partners under the lead of the Citizenship Foundation as part of a joint Council of Europe and European Commission "Human Rights and Democracy in Action Pilot Projects Scheme is a useful up-to-date pedagogic resource (Kerr & Huddleston, 2016).

2.2. A public sphere deficit of the EU ?

As for the media in EU Members States, and an alleged communication or public sphere deficit of the EU, Koopmans and Erbe (2004) developed a systematic approach to the Europeanization of public spheres, distinguishing "three forms of Europeanized political communication: supranational, vertical and horizontal", proposing that "the spatial reach and boundaries of public communication can be determined by investigating communicative flows and assessing the relative density of public communication within and between different geopolitical spaces." (p. 97). Koopmans and Erbe (2004) applied this model to data on political claim making in seven issue fields in German print media in the year 2000, finding that the degree and forms of Europeanization of political communication vary considerably among policy fields. They argued that "these differences are strongly linked to the extent and type (supranational or intergovernmental) of competencies of the EU in these fields. Contrary to the hypothesis of a public sphere deficit, the German mass media seem to quite accurately reflect the Europeanization of policy making, at least in those policy

fields where a clear cut transfer of competencies to the supranational EU level has taken place.” (p. 97). There will be major differences in the mainstream, quality media (so-called broadsheets, daily or weekly or monthly magazines), print online or TV, and the popular or populist press (so-called tabloid) in this regard, however. Lauristin (2007) explores the potential and current limits of a European public sphere and through and in which to socially imagine a new Europe.

2.3. A democratic deficit of the EU ?

Much has been written, including in academic circles, on the issue of a ‘democratic deficit’ as one of the main challenges for the European Union, including such as the paradoxical situation of an increasingly powerful European Parliament (EP) with receding voting participation in EP elections since 1979, with 2014 being the lowest on record so far (despite the experiment of having named lead candidates campaigning for the major European political families) with 42.54% across the EU on average (Euractiv, 2014). The perceived gap between citizens and the European level of governance has also been highlighted in several national referenda concerning EU matters (not least the June 2014 Brexit one in the UK; but also the rejection of EU membership in the Faroe Islands in 1973 and Greenland in 1985 (Rebhahn, 2016); Denmark’s two referenda held before the treaty of Maastricht passed, the first in 1992 with approval of the treaty of Maastricht denied by a slim margin of 50,7%, subsequent to which Denmark negotiated and received opt-outs from portions of the treaty: Economic and Monetary Union, Union Citizenship, Justice and Home Affairs and Common Defence; the required referendum on the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon in the Republic of Ireland which rejected the treaty a first time round in 2008; the referenda on introducing the Euro single currency since 2002, covering now 19 of the currently 28 EU Member States, with referenda turning out against accession to the Euro in Denmark (which has an opt-out on this in 2000) and Sweden (which formally does not have such an opt-out in 2003); the referenda on the EU constitution in several Member States in 2005 (overwhelming in favour in Spain, clearly against in France; strongly against in The Netherlands, and clearly in favour in Luxembourg, whilst planned but not held in a number of further Member States; the Republic of Ireland ratification of the Lisbon Treaty through a referendum due to the Irish constitution which was clearly rejected in 2008, only to be strongly approved in 2009 in another referenda after the European Council and the Irish government released the “Irish Guarantees” stating that the other Member States would not use the possibility in the Lisbon Treaty to diminish the number of permanent EU Commissioners in favour of a rotating system with fewer commissioners and not threaten Ireland’s military neutrality and rules on abortion; the Danish European Union opt-out referendum of 2015 concerning on converting the opt-out from

participation in the area of Justice and Home Affairs area into an opt-in: the possibility for the Danes to decide on a case by case basis; the 2015 Greek bailout referendum; and lastly the Dutch Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement referendum of 2016). Coupled with an economic crisis since 1996, arguably ongoing in much of the EU, this has arguably resulted in – or at least reflected - an upsurge of Euroscepticism (Fuchs, Magni-Berton, & Roger, eds, 2009; Leconte, 2010) in southern Europe (Verney, ed, 2013), northern Europe (Rebhan 2016), western Europe and also now Eastern Europe perhaps (FitzGibbon, Leruth, & Startin, 2016). This is reflected in major gains for Eurosceptic parties (both on the right – France, Greece, UK, Germany, Austria - and the left – Italy, Spain, Greece, Germany) in the 2014 European Parliament elections.

Pérez (2013) argues, contrary to some of the other literature on the European public sphere and the apparent communication deficit where oftentimes the focus is on media coverage of EU affairs or the communication strategies of supranational and national institutions and political actors, that the problem is not one of a deficient media coverage of EU affairs or poor communication, but rather one of cultural and structural limitations, which cannot be solved by press releases, twitter accounts and increased media coverage. He contends that the issue, including within the EU, is the transformation of the public sphere where public and private merge, media are commercialised and democracy is dominated by interest group representation instead of citizen participation. Coupled with an argued mostly absent identification between those who govern and those who are governed at perhaps national and argued European demos level on the one hand (Kies & Nanz, eds, 2013), and a tendency towards consensus, corporatism and technocratic arrangements, on the other hand, this is said to prevent the EU from becoming truly democratic in his argument. Pérez (2013) illustrates his arguments with a substantial body of empirical data, based on the analysis of newspaper articles, interviews and ‘observation sessions’, with the empirical work focussed on two regions, the mostly pro-European Galicia and largely Eurosceptic Yorkshire (as born out in the Brexit referendum of June 2016).

Del Río Villar (2014) presents a more hopeful, perhaps not fully utopian, scenario of a supranational EU democracy as both project and process where to restore public credibility in politics, representative democracy has to lead the way but must be complemented by participatory democracy in the sense of the participation of civil society in the EU. To achieve this, she stresses the interaction between European citizens and the European institutions, education as a key element of active citizenship, solidarity, participation, and communication. Cooperation between state actors and non-state actors is widespread and has probably existed for a long time, though currently demands

for the integration of non-state actors, especially citizens and civil society, into governance processes can be heard from many politicians, academics, and international organizations. Geißel & Joas (eds, 2013) offer a nuanced assessment of the impetus so far in terms of limited innovations in Europe to established ways of decision making in terms of participatory democratic innovations with many national and sub-national governments having followed this route and having implemented various kinds of participatory innovations, i.e. the inclusion of citizens directly into processes of political will-formation and decision making. European, small-scale, deliberative procedures that emphasize discursive decision making - in contrast to the aggregative modus of direct democracy - are mostly adopted in experiments and small scale units (Breser, 2016), with both benefits and disadvantages that those different democratic innovations can result in.

As for institution, Leston-Bandeira (2014) argues that “The European Parliament is a prime example of an institution where the need to strengthen the link with citizens became a key priority, in particular following the Lisbon Treaty's reinforcement of the parliament's powers and visibility”, and argues that “political will was key to move forward the public engagement agenda, and that new media has become a core element of this strategy.” (p. 415).

As Stratenschulte (2015a) makes clear, and we agree, it is *not* the task of Europe / EU focused civic and political education to convince people that European / EU integration is a “good thing” or working or operating smoothly, rather participants in civic education need to be enabled to ask meaningful questions and critically process information and insights from political sources and process, and use this as springboard for their own political democratic participation and activities.

2.2. Empirical studies of EU civic education

Keating (2009, 2014) has explored the extent to which citizenship education could be moving from national to post-national models of educating for European citizenship. Wallace, Datler, & Spanning (2005) present results from a study of a total of 3890 18 to 24 year olds in 10 European regions with factors analysed that make young people interested in European integration and likely to vote in European elections, showing that “aspects of 'activation' such as political efficacy, discussions of social and political issues and interest in a range of social and political issues influence both attitudes. In addition emotional attachment to Europe proved to be another important factor. 'Activation' is influenced - apart from socio-demographic variables - by

citizenship education, which varies considerably between countries in kind and extent. (p.6).

Oberle (2012a, 2012b) undertook an empirical study presented focusing on the political knowledge of German pupils in secondary and grammar schools, looking at both their objective and subjective (perceived, self-evaluated) knowledge with regard to the EU. The potential influence of various predictors on both types of knowledge were determined and analysed, such as gender, cultural capital, migration background, school grade, news consumption, class climate and attitudes towards the EU. Oberle (2015) discusses the relevance of EU-related political competencies for young people as well as different dimensions of these competencies, introduces different approaches, problems of conveying the EU at school along possibilities of meeting these difficulties. She presents results of two quantitative studies on the effects of everyday EU civics lessons as well as short EU simulation games on EU-related political competencies of secondary school pupils. Oberle & Forstmann (2013, 2014, 2015a, 2015b) have systematically continuing education of civics teachers for teaching the European Union across Germany, as the European Union has by now has become a compulsory content of civics classes in secondary schools throughout Germany. According to Oberle & Forstmann (2015b) “for teachers, however, teaching this topic is connected with manifold difficulties, for example, due to the complexity and dynamics of European integration, the (perceived) distance of European Union politics, and popular prejudices. European Union content and didactics are not always included in teacher training; moreover, civics is often taught by teachers who have not been trained in this subject “ (p. 56). Oberle & Forstmann (2015c, 2015d) have explored the effect of qualified teaching in politics and economics at secondary school level on EU-relevant competencies of pupils. Oberle & Forstmann (2015e) have also explored the attitudes towards the EU in connection with expectations of and demands on politics of pupils. Oberle & Leunig (2016a, 2016b, forthcoming a, forthcoming b) have furthermore explored the effect of political role plays on attitudes and motivation towards as well as knowledge of the EU of pupils.

Dejaghere & Quintelier (2008) surveyed more than 6000 Belgian secondary school students regarding their sense of European citizenship, and show that „a genuine identification with Europe — one that is not purely based on a positive evaluation of the EU from a utilitarian point of view — is related to higher levels of tolerance towards ethnic minorities, Muslims and immigrants.“ (p. 339).

2.3 Gaps and suggested ways forward

In the run up to the vigorously contested Referendum on Membership of the European Union in the United Kingdom in June 2016, Waller offered advice on developing inquiry questions for teachers to stimulate discussion in the classroom (Waller, 2016). The European Parliament UK Office offered 10 free one-day politically neutral conferences to help educators gain a critical understanding of the issues and practical ideas for teaching the EU with confidence. These conferences were organised during 2016 by Active Citizens FE (ACFE), working in collaboration with the Association of Citizenship Teaching (ACT; <http://teachingcitizenship.org.uk/events>).

In addition to formal civic education (Osler, Rathenow, & Starkey, 1995), non-formal civic education (Georgi, ed, 2008) and lifelong learning (Holford, Saar, & Ure, eds, 2013; Lima & Guimarães, 2011) – in the context of some formal education (school) or higher education engagement with this and some (including new) media representations of EU policy-making – is argued to play a significant and perhaps leading role, at least for now and if one does not specialise in this in higher education studies. One important aspect is citizenship education with the hard-to-reach learners (Kakos, Müller-Hofstede & Ross, 2016), which does tend to present an issue with civic education on EU issues also. Initiatives such as the START foundation in Germany for the promotion, via stipends for two years, for pupils which have only recently migrated to Germany to assist in the development of their educational biographies are to be applauded, but again are for motivated pupils only.

A well-designed “crash course” on European parliamentary elections with schools / adolescents with some role play and debate formats and input from external expert and representative politicians such as Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) or candidates can help in the endeavour (Weber, 2014; Stratenschulte, 2014a; Stratenschulte, 2014b; Stratenschulte, 2015b; Rappenglück, 2014). On occasion, special didactic conferences are organised for both secondary pupils with a short methodological introduction and a range of selected texts that can be useful across different school subjects, in addition to a diplomat explaining matters further, such as the presentation event of the European Academy of Berlin on “Europe in Flux: Great Britain and the European Union” prior to the referendum on the membership in the EU in the United Kingdom (Europäische Akademie Berlin, 2016). More generally, didactic material for teachers of secondary pupils may be updated (even when only prepared some months before this) as major milestones occur (such as the Brexit referendum outcome) (e.g. Europäische Akademie Berlin, 2017).

What is missing, according to Bade (2016), is a yet any kind of focus or training with regard to Europe / the EU for heads and deputy-heads of schools (rather than teachers), as explored in the ELICITplus project. According to

interview results, European learning of school leadership does occur via Comenius exchange and Erasmus + participation but more bi-laterally or in groupings than in the frame of a common European education space (as envisioned in the Lisbon Treaty, but of course not even yet necessarily the case at federally structured countries in the EU at national level, e.g. Germany). Bade (2016) points to the foundational role of concepts such as humanism, central to a schools focussed publication of a European authors' collective (Maison de l'Europe, 2012), which are advocated in a special chapter as shared European values which should not only be brought closer to pupils but should also be the basis for ethics-based leadership of schools (and where the second appendix provides a national overview of didactic materials and sources). Schleicher (2012) does see potential for schools generally to become more European, but notes the underestimated influence of both education systems and schools themselves. The EU school project day of 2016 in Germany for instance, encouraged by Chancellor Merkel, for the school subjects of social studies and politics, is a good example of how EU issues in the school can be furthered in an engaging way. This saw ministers of the Federal government, parliamentarians of the various parliaments (federal and state level), federal and state civil servants, and academics visit schools across Germany, with predatory material at three different levels (extra materials necessary, technical assistance necessary, and advanced) provided by the European Academy of Berlin (Baumann, 2016). The recommendation is that teachers and the school plan well ahead, and selected the range of formats they are interested in, including parliamentary work simulations and media work, where the advanced formats needs several days of intensive preparation as well as a full day on the actual EU school day. If done well this goes a considerable distance, but does not replace the value of *in-situ* insights, in this case on the working of the EU and her core institutions.

Of course, excursions to national parliaments or ministries can provide insights into EU matters for civic education, and so can visits of politicians, civil servants and experts to schools – but it does not provide an international and contextualised insight. We therefore now turn to previous literature on political excursions and to EU institutions in particular.

3. Political excursions to the EU

In excursions / field study visits a variety of methods can be deployed, which can assist a variety of learning paths (Bönsch, 2008; Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski, eds, 2011; Roder, 2004). In civic / political education, excursions / field study visits follow as explorations (Weißeno, 2000) the didactic principle of 'real contact' (Becker, 1991) and 'experiential orientation' (Rathenow, 1998), clearness, vividness and clarity, as well as the interest-, problem- and participant

orientation (Ackermann, 1997; Detjen, 1999; Ciupke, 2004). The participants obtain the opportunity for concrete, as well as emotional and even sensory experiences of political realities and their representations (Ackermann, 1998). Due to both time constraints and for organisational reasons, as well as potentially the positionality of the design team as well as the inputting experts and since all 'realities' are contested and multiple in nature, only a slice of reality can be obtained (Detjen, 2007, p. 63). Roder (2004) argues that "multi-disciplinary' field trips to Brussels to accompany undergraduate courses on European political and economic integration are of exceptional academic value ... [and that] study trips are a resource that should be more commonly utilised as they are highly beneficial to student learning outcomes." (p.43).

This article presents and advocates a concept of a political excursion to the EU institutions which is guided by three central overall learning objectives or aims: a) The participants shall learn about the central EU institutions / actors, their structures, competences and modes of working in a close-up way; b) they shall critically illuminate and discuss the EU decision-making processes, the diverging and competing positions, conflicts and role of central actors and institutions through the exemplary selection of a concrete EU policy field; and c) finally they shall realise (first) contact zones and inspirations for their own (Europe-/EU) political civic engagement and activities (for the future). In this sense, this approach can in one form be related to Detjen, Maasing, Richter & Weißenö's (2012) model of political competencies (subject knowledge, political judgement capability, political action capability, political orientation and motivation). The projects and resources of the Council of Europe are very useful in this context also, but not our focus in this article, though there are clear lines of connection in civic education around democracy, human rights and minority rights and diversity (Becker, 2012; Georgi, ed, 2008).

Therefore, in this article we review the concept and practice of political excursions to EU institutions, and explain and assess the merits and disadvantages of our own model and practice of civic education *in-situ* seminars on EU institutions and contextualised policy making themes and topics. The ideas, evaluations and assessments advanced here are based on experiences and reflections on over 40 such *in-situ* seminars held since 2004 in Brussels (Weber 2015a) or Strasbourg [which we will cover separately, with a cross-over link to the Council of Europe, in a separate article], on EU institutions and policy fields, with a different design and pedagogic logic to the other political excursions to EU institutions on the market on policy themes such as asylum, migration, environmental, climate change / protection (Weber, 2015b), energy, youth unemployment, financial / debt crisis, trade, development, human rights (both externally facing and within the EU), security and defence, EU expansion, Brexit or Counter-terrorism. A number of those seminars have been in

partnerships with secondary schools, the START foundation, universities but most are publicly advertised on a first-come-first-served basis.

The feedback of the participants – anonymously by questionnaires, as well as verbally at the end review of each *in-situ* seminar, as well as – at times participating teachers or seminar team colleagues (who are also trained civic educators or on occasion higher education lecturers), as well as reviewers and quality auditors at or on occasion send by the German Federal Civic Education Agency to observe one of such *in-situ* seminars are very important for evaluations and assessments advanced here, added to by comments from EU institution representatives as well as other civic educators where an exchange and dialogue has occurred.

Official organiser of these EU policy field themed *in-situ* seminars (political excursions to) in Brussels is the Verein zur Förderung politischen Handelns e. V. or Association for the Advancement of Political Action (v.f.h.; see <http://www.vfh-online.de>), which is a small charitable, polity party independent and licensed civic education organisation, which organises and conducts (in partnership, if appropriate and desired) civic education seminars, trainings, workshops (including on first voter education prior to elections) across Germany and in Brussels and Strasbourg. The stated aim of the v.f.h. / Association for the Advancement of Political Action is to motivate and enable especially young(er) people to democratic political participation through civic education.

These EU policy field themed *in situ* seminars (political excursions to) in Brussels can be publicly advertised (on the v.f.h. website and via a range of dissemination (e-lists) or requested by a group or partner organisation with a specific or flexible policy field thematic remit for such a group or partner only. To be eligible for German Federal Civic Education co-funding the group size must not be below 10 persons, which can be secondary school pupils, further or higher education students or of a more mixed background.

4. Towards a new model: Exploring and experiencing the EU *in-situ* through a specific policy field

One problem in communicating and teaching EU issues is the high complexity of the institutional and political dynamics (Rappenglück, 2004; Detjen, 2004b; Weidenfeld, 2013). Therefore, the question poses itself: Should we, in the approach of political excursions, aim to get an insight through an overall generic and thus by nature and implication more shallow and schematic,

or should we instead go for a particular theme / policy domain / issue to achieve more depth and concrete learning experience? Normally, the providers of political excursions to the EU opt and decide between the “floodlight” and “pointed illumination” for the rather or mostly very generic approach. For instance, in the morning you might have a session on ‘Europe’s role in the world’ with a representative of the Council of the European Union, followed by a lunchtime session on ‘Does the EU have a democracy deficit?’ at the European Parliament, and in the afternoon a session of ‘How does the EU function?’ with the European Commission (see for instance the programme of a Europe centre: <http://europa-zentrum.de/images/novprogrbr%C3%BC.pdf>). This approach harbours the danger that the learners can only scratch or skim the different political themes present in the EU at the surface, and that their insights and comprehension will remain superficial or shallow. At first sight, different interests concerning content can be considered and reflected in the approach. However, it is hardly possible to piece the different parts of the EU puzzle together to arrive at an overview that promotes real insights and understanding of a deeper nature.

Contrasting to this, the approach practised and advocated here by the present authors follows the concept of ‘exemplary learning’ (Grammes, 2004). In order to make the access to the phenomenon easier and enable a deeper interaction with the phenomenon, in our approach the “cosmos EU” is broken down to a policy field, or even better a controversial question or issue. This way, two main objectives can be achieved: Firstly, the participants obtain a concrete and vivid impression as to how the EU works, which roles the different core institutions and actors play and how they influence the policy shaping and making via a selected policy field, so as to promote a more founded understanding of the EU’s political system. Secondly, the learners can deepen their knowledge and understanding of a concrete and controversially discussed EU policy field: What are the aims and characteristics of this EU policy field? Which proposals are debated and discussed? What are the central bones of contention? Which positions and which interest shape and dominate the discussion? In view of the enormous spectrum of EU policy making and political activities, there are many possible choices and options for thematic fields.

The degree of controversy and the topicality of the theme / topic should receive attention here alongside the (presumed) interests of the civic education participants and the competences of the seminar team with regard to the chosen policy field (in addition to experience with civic education approaches). If there is a pre-existing group of participants (rather than an openly advertised *in-situ* seminar), it is advisable to agree the thematic focus with the learners. One could,

for instance, make proposals about suitable potential topics out of which one could select one (or vice versa).

5. To Experience the EU from multiple perspectives

The second element of the approach and concept presented here is the aimed for multi-perspective design, and more specifically in terms of institutional, (party) political grouping as well – if possible – nationality perspective (both in terms of the inputting experts as well as ideally the participants themselves).

5.1 An audit of mainstream EU-focussed civic education excursions

The ‘reality check’ of Europe / EU-focussed civic education shows that certainly not all political excursions to the EU nor advice guides for it cover all the core institutions of the EU (Peterson and Shackleton, eds, 2012; Tömmel, 2014; Wallace, Pollack & Young, eds., 2014; McCormick, 2017; Green European Foundation, 2015), such as the Council of the EU (Wessels, 2016), the EU Commission (Nugent & Rhinard, 2015) and the European Parliament (Dialer, Maurer, & Richter, 2015; Corbett, Jacobs, & Shackleton, 2011; Dialer & Lichtenberger, eds, 2011; Judge & Earnshaw, 2008).

For instance, Kaminski, Eggert & Koch (2005) refer to and characterises the Council of the European Union, but it does not get included in the advice and recommendations as to how to design and plan a visit by school groups in Brussels for the purposes of EU-focussed civic education. But even if this is covered, or for instance the Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany (or perhaps at times the lobbying or interest representation of a German Federal state) is included in the programme (which is not the same as the Council of the EU in terms of the conceptual didactic design due to its different, pan-Member State role), then other important actors of the policy-making, especially non-governmental interest groups - both business and civilsociety – (Dionigi, 2016; Classen, 2014; Dialer, ed, 2014; Gammelin & Löw, 2014; Greenwood, 2011; Joos, 2011; Dinan & Wesselius, 2010; Coen & Richardson, eds, 2009; Dagger & Kambeck, 2007; Klüver, 2013; Geiger, 2012; De Cock, 2011; Burtscher & Winner, eds, 2008; Karr, 2008; Naurin, 2007; Michalowitz, 2005; Schmeider, 2007; Witte, 2012; Tenbucken, 2002) are not included in the programme design.

In most cases, participants of such a civic education excursion of the European Parliament only get an insight via and through one MEP (sometimes for funding issues their own, which has some advantages in terms of connecting

back to their own locality) and thus only one political grouping in the EP and one political party (back in, say, Germany). For German EU civic education excursions / visits, the “German lense” is overall pretty dominant, since most or even all of the experts which are met by the civic education group are German by nationality (often times, for language reasons), even if they represent and are employed by different European institutions and organisations. The ‘EU of diversity’ is thus only very indirectly or perhaps even hardly made accessible and included in the design of such a political excursion to the EU institutions.

5.3. Our alternative model: a high level of multi-perspective in reality-near way

Therefore, and in contrast to the above, we advocate – and practice – a model which deliberately aims at a high level of multi-perspective, so as to enable the participants to better understand the functions and ways of working of the EU and the different actors – including in the contextual (lobbying and advocacy) web around it – in a vivid and accessible and reality-near way, as well as to enable the participants to experience and sense the diversity which is one of the key characteristics and mode of the EU.

The following dimensions should be included in any programme of an *in situ* seminar on the EU:

- *the EU core institutions*: visits to and talks from / discussions with the so-called power-triangle of the EU, that is the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, as the central formal players in the EU policy-making / co-legislation process should certainly be all included.

In terms of policy-fields, the EU Commission and the Council of the EU Secretariat are organised into different General Directorates (DGs) – roughly equivalent to ministries / departments at the national level. The European Parliament, for purposes of co-legislation and scrutiny, is organised into standing committees (in the current legislative period of the 8th EP, lasting until the 2019 elections), some of which have (several) important sub-committees, as well as EP delegations to third countries or also inter-parliamentary delegation to third country democratic parliaments. The EP also has a Secretariat, with some key support and also research functions.

Tailored to the selected / requested thematic policy focus of the *in situ* seminar, talks and discussions with officials of the corresponding DGs of the EU Commission and the Council of the EU and elected politicians (MEPs) which are members (better than substitute members) of the respective EP committees /

(and key sub-committees) should be organised. Some specialised Parliamentary Assistants of MEPs with a thematic focus may also add value to the programme.

Moreover, it is highly desirable that the group does meet more than one MEP, if at all possible from different political groupings in the EP (political parties in their respective home countries) and also different EU Member States. With more than 750 MEPs drawn from (currently) 28 countries (post Brexit 27 with accordingly a lower number of MEPs), which are for the time being organised into eight political groupings in the EP (and a number of non-attached MEPs also), the choice is sufficiently large in principle. The pool of interesting MEPs for a specific *in-situ* seminar on a specific theme narrows down, when the requests for meeting with the seminar group is concentrated on the policy area active MEPs, especially relevant full (sub-)committee members or so-called rapporteurs and shadow rapporteurs, who are working on a particular dossier (proposal for legislation) or own initiative report by the EP) for the EP (sub)committee overall or the respective political groupings taking an interest in a dossier in a (sub)committee.

If for logistical reasons the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU cannot be visited (limited room availabilities), an alternative is the Permanent Representation of one of the Member States to the EU (say, of the Federal Republic of Germany), in order to gain an insight into the work of the Council of the EU as the institution where the interest representation of the EU Member States and a co-legislator of the EU in any chosen policy field.

In the case of external and foreign policy of the EU, the European External Action Service (EEAS), which is overseen by both the European Commission and the Council of the European Union in a personal union of an office, the EU's High Representative for Foreign and External Affairs who is also a Member of the Cabinet of EU Commissioners, should be included.

- *Non-Governmental interest groups:* The visits of the core EU institutions are complemented by visits to and discussions with policy field relevant interest group representations.

The number, variety and scope of non-governmental organisations, associations, industry federations or agencies, which are seeking to influence EU policy-making is huge (see for instance the - currently voluntary (Moessing, 2017) – Transparency Register jointly operated by the European Commission and the European Parliament, with well over 11 thousand registrants, including institutions, by the end of March 2017:
<http://ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister/public/homePage.do>; see also

LobbyControl, 2012; a current overview of German economic and political interest representations to the EU can for instance be found on the website of the Germany's Permanent Representation to the EU: http://www.bruessel-eu.diplo.de/Vertretung/bruessel__eu/de/05-Dt-Interessenvertretungen/_C3_9Cbersicht_20Deutscher_20Interessenvertretungen.html

It is important overall to recognise their formal and informal role and *modus operandi* to understand advocacy, lobbying and (attempted and realised) their influences on EU policy-making, some of which is of course expressly asked for, desired and important in the process from an early stage down to the implementation (Shotton & Nixon, eds, 2016; Dialer, ed, 2014; Schendelen, 2013). Of course as important, including for EU policy-making, is lobbying in the respective EU Member States (Bitoni & Harris, eds, 2017).

Depending on the topic of the *in-situ* seminar, participant group interest emphasis and the make-up of the group in question (especially if organised for it in a tailored way, rather than publicly advertised), one can add to the programme visits to and talks with further institutions and organisations such as the European Economic and Social Committee (which understands itself as “a bridge between the EU and organised civil society”), the European Committee of the Regions (“the European Union's assembly of local and regional representatives that provides sub-national authorities with a direct voice within the EU's institutional framework”), the liaison offices of, for instance, the German Federal States, political foundations (either of national political parties or of party families in Europe) and so-called EU-think tanks (which do applied and conceptual research on EU policy matters, from a European or also a national perspective; see for instance <http://www.eu.thinktankdirectory.org/>).

5.4 Interactive, triangulated learning *in situ*

The central aim of these visits and talks / discussions is to provide the learners the opportunity in a real interaction to explore the co-legislating institutions of the EU, as well as influencing non-governmental organisations (both business and civil society), in order to shed some light on their ways of working, their scope for shaping EU policy-making as well as some of their fundamental but also more detailed – in a particular chose policy-field – in a personal interaction, so as to ultimately engage the participants with EU policy debates and competing discourses from different institutional, political and if possible also differing national perspectives. Furthermore, it is attempted to provide the participants with a direct, even sensuous, view into the EU mechanisms and operations by visiting the EU representatives at their places of

work. The impressions of assembly or meeting rooms with speaker microphones, personal or country name sign on tables, translator cabins, long corridors with many offices or the busy (at times hectic) atmosphere in the foyer of the European Parliament also contribute to the “experience EU”.

6. To Experience the EU through an *in-situ* seminar

Hundreds of thousands of visitor groups travel to Brussels every year, to gain an impression of the EU. Looking at the programmes of these study tours, one is struck how they are often characterised by a mix of Europe-focused civic education, historical and cultural further education as well as social (group interaction) and touristic elements (for an exemplary one, see Bunjes, 2009, p. 55). We do not want to query the pedagogic value of such provisions in principle. However, the model and approach for a political excursion to the EU presented in this article is designed in contrast to the study tours in the sense of *visitation tourism* “à l’européen” (see Detjen, 2004a, p. 201, for a critique of this practice), and is rather conceived as an *in-situ* seminar.

6.1 A learning phase approach

Accordingly, the visits and discussions with the institutional representatives are embedded in learning phases, which orient themselves in relationship with classic (civic education) seminar work, within which the participants deal with the focus EU cognitively and with the help of various methods, during which the upcoming discussions with representatives are actively prepared, but also review and critically reflect on the insights from and impressions of the talks and discussions so far as collectively a group, with some moderation from the seminar team if needed and helpful. Depending on the phase of the seminar, the participants are there actively, receptively and interactively engaged (Müller & Papenkort, 1997).

A fundamental challenge with designing of political excursions to the EU is that the group is often times quite diverse, especially if the *in-situ* seminars are publicly advertised. This is with regard to the motivation of the group (although in most cases it should be a voluntary participation, in substance and not just – as with some school groups – officially, but also the prior knowledge of the concrete policy field which is the thematic focus in question, as well as of the EU in general. One part of the group may be motivated by rather general curiosity, whereas another part is intrigued and excited about a particular thematic policy field, for instance since they are (or intend to become) politically or professionally active in this area or because they want to research into the field further (for instance, for a university assignment, dissertation or

thesis). Accordingly, the pre-knowledge and familiarity with the policy theme as well as the expectations for what a successful *in-situ* seminar in their eyes would be like in terms of content may differ (quite markedly).

6.2. Introductory phase: EU system and EU policy field

At the very beginning of the here characterised *in situ* seminar concept and design, participants are introduced to the core basic knowledge about both the EU system and the selected theme / policy field. This can be stretched over two days, with varying civic education methods. It can be of advantage to prepare core and illustrative material prior to the *in-situ* seminar, and make this available to the participants prior to it, for instance through relevant internet links before and after registration (on the seminar website) and also a reader which can be send out electronically in advance.

By utilising a variety of methods and learning modes, for instance the “EU institutions puzzle”, “EU time line”, “EU quiz”, work on selected texts – and other tasks and discussions in small groups (see for instance Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg & Centrum für Angewandte Politikforschung, 2009), the functioning of the EU system and the role of the different EU actors, both EU institutions and interest representation groups, can be clarified and made more cognitively present (again) for the participants.

In addition, the group is being familiarised with the EU policy field chosen as the themed focus of the *in-situ* seminar, as well as being prepared for the various talks with the representatives of institutions by developing or consolidating a basic comprehension of the concrete EU policy field. They (begin to) develop an understanding of why the EU is active in this policy field at all (background, aims and motivation, and policy domains). What does EU actually mean in this policy field (institutional framework, central actors, and their role / policy and action capabilities and opportunities)? What are the topical conflict issues (including over to what extent or degree, or form, any EU policy or legislation should be developed [at all])?

The participants furthermore learn about and become (more) familiar with key (technical) terms which are relevant for understanding the debate. The central aim of the unit is to develop and secure the foundation (knowledge) for being able to follow the (often quite complex and at times quite technical) talks and discussion contributions / answers of the expert informants the groups has an interaction with, but also to put them into context and be able to critically evaluate them (political sensitivity and judgement) and moreover to be able to

ask informed (including critical) questions (both concerning knowledge as well as opinions) actively in a dialogue (political participation towards action skills).

6.3. Preparation of the meetings and discussions with the EU experts: developing a group question bank

Next follows the preparation phase for the meetings with experts, so that participants can work on what they would like and need to know from and ask the various meeting partners in a focussed and conscious way. The development of a question bank or catalogue enables the learners to constrict a shared core questions guide which enables the group collectively to conduct a semi-structured interview in the Questions & Answer part of the meetings with the various EU and associated institutions / organisations.

From experience it has been established that it is advisable and productive to distinguish between foundational questions, which are regarded as central and so should be asked of all core experts in discussions for purposes of triangulation, and specific, institution or individual expert tailored questions, and to collect those separately for the question bank.

As developing ‘expert interviewers’ the participants can consult each other (as well as the seminar leaders, but only after having done the peer process first) regarding questioning techniques and interview strategies. By motivating and supporting the learners to prepare themselves collectively in a focused way for the expert interviews and to have those sessions with external speakers as interactive as possible, the danger of having a passive encounter or reception of the external speakers can be significantly reduced. It can also activate more participants – hopefully nearly everyone – to be actively engaged in these sessions with external speakers, rather than only having select (more extrovert or more special issue interested) participants being vocal and perhaps too dominant in the dialogue whilst many other would remain silent in those sessions. The distance between the participants and the political institutions respectively actors they are visiting and exploring can thus be minimised, but also a critical and reflective stance can be encouraged. From experience and feedback on behalf of both the external EU institutions or related organisations speakers / experts during and also after those sessions, they appreciate and value interested, topic and issues-prepared and question-rich groups, and often then devote more time, if possible, to those encounters than was originally agreed. Furthermore, the question catalogue / guide which the participants prepared collectively also serves as (one important) basis for the analysis of the encounters and talks by discussions with the institutional experts or actors.

6.4. Analysis and evaluation of the EU expert meetings

During the analysis and evaluation sessions after the visits to and talks by and discussions with institutions and their representatives and actors the participants / learners are encouraged to exchange, discuss and debate the insights and impressions from these visits, collectively and critically in a reflective manner.

This phase, which occurs regularly in our seminar concept, can for instance be used to explore in which particular outlook and frame on ‘reality’ (or construction thereof) the respective representatives or actors within an institution or organisation adopt, deploy or portray to (this group of) outsiders who are studying them and their conceptions of the EU world and policy making and underlying principles, philosophies or motives. This can extend to looking at and evaluating their posture and communication behaviour (and strategy), and how this may have a bearing on the (framing or delivery or clarity) of their messages (as intended perhaps, or at least as received or perceived. The contrasting with the question bank developed by the participants and, if congruent with those actually asked (if not already answered in the input talks), to what extent they were answered (in substance, if perhaps not as expected) is useful, as is the consideration of which new questions arose for the learners group, including for subsequent information and discussion meetings with experts / actors or further discussion within the group itself.

6.5. Overall seminar evaluation and outlook for afterwards

On the one hand, the final overall seminar discussions and evaluations are intended and serve to provide sufficient fertile space to facilitate and enable a collective reflection on and evaluation of all visits and discussions with experts and actors – as well as discussions and processes within the seminar group itself. But on the other hand, and at least as if not more importantly, it is aimed at promoting the formation of (informed) political opinions (further).

To this purpose, the participants / learners are given the opportunity to discuss selective issues and questions further, for instance those that were imbued with particular controversy during the *in-situ* seminar or to (start to) develop their own thoughts and propositions on how a particular policy field of the EU should be handled or indeed of the EU itself.

The thematic focus and the methods of this phase are oriented on the preceding seminar flow and the issues interest focus of the participants / learners.

For instance, one option is that the participants are given the task of developing proposals for a reform or initiative of the EU, and to present and discuss this. Or they get the opportunity to take issues with and develop and declare their reasoned / motivated position to particular / specific scenarios or proposals that are being discussed in the political arena (e.g. by policy-makers and lobbyists)

It seems obvious that this concluding phase is also especially – though by no means the only in the course of the seminar – an opportune platform to sign-post the various political participation channels and opportunities in the EU consciously and in view of the influence of insights and impressions gained in the seminar on a specific domain of the EU policy-making and the EU governance overall. Those opportunities for political involvement in the shaping of EU policy making range from participation in the elections for the European parliament, in European citizenship initiatives (since April 2012), contact to MEPs, online consultations on proposed and developing EU legislation as made possible (also for individuals) by the European Commission since 2001, online blogs, and the writing of letters to the editor, or articles for, the (local) press to influence opinion formation and much more.

The engagement with the opportunities for becoming involved with EU policy-making as active citizens is motivated by the three core aims of civic education: to facilitate the development of knowledge attainment, to support the capacity for critical evaluation and opinion formation, and to promote participation in political processes (Breser, 2016; Georgi, 2008; Detjen, Massing, Richter & Weißenö, 2012).

6.6. Political Excursions to the EU in Brussels – additional program elements

It is advisable, depending on organisational and time budget for the *in-situ* seminar, as well as the composition and interests of the learner group, to include additional program content.

6.6.1. Visit to / Observation of a relevant committee meeting of the European Parliament

To experience the EU from close up, we recommend to integrate the observation of a committee meeting session of the European Parliament (or on rare occasions, the full assembly), which has a thematic connection to the tailored policy-field orientation of the *in-situ* seminar. This way, the participants gain an atmospheric impression of the work of the European Parliament / MEPs, by listening in and seeing – parts of – the debate in the semi-circular EP session

meeting room with the interpreters' cabins, but also the chairing of the session and debating MEPs (as well as, depending on the session, a representative of the European Commission or the Council of the EU Presidency) in action with their own eyes. The rules of committee work, and the agenda for the committee meeting, should be explained to the participants beforehand, so that they can follow and make sense of the proceedings better.

6.6.2. "Member of the European Parliament for one day" - group role play in the Parliamentarium of the European Parliament (EP)

A further additional element that is enriching in its learning approach is the simulation group role play "MEP for a day" which last for about 2 hours, designed in an interactive manner by the Parliamentarium, the visitor centre of the EP (Pearson, 2013). The participants take on the role of an MEP, and experience in a lively and reality-near way the EP policy / legislative process from the EP's side. The learners are divided up into four fictive political groupings, which nonetheless reflect the political realities in the European Parliament, and negotiate over and decide on two legislative proposals (Directives) of the European Commission, for which they have to find an agreement within the EP itself (joint position) and with the Council of the European Union (representing the governments of the Member States). As MEPs they meet in their respective political groupings, in two policy-field Committees of the EP as well as in the Plenary of the EP. They also hold press conferences, and communicate via info stations with a multitude and variety of interest representatives (lobbyists). This playful experiential insight into EP parliamentary work can aid the understanding of the learners additionally. Talks by and discussions with real MEPs, as well as the reflection and debrief round at the end of the seminar day enable a "reality check" to critically reflect on the role play simulation experience. Of course, this does not replace a more sustained insight into the organisation of everyday political life in an MEPs office (Busby, 2013), though meeting an MEP's (experienced) assistant (who often do the policy thematic preparatory or even background co-ordination work) can also be useful in this regard for the learners.

There may also be, and this usually requires additional registration beforehand, an opportunity to visit / partake in public events of EU think tanks or political foundations that include expert contributions or panel discussion with EU representatives - including MEPs and / or experts on EU policy-making on relevant themes to the focus of the *in-situ* seminar organised.

6.6.3. City Guided Tour: Brussels as a political-historical city

It is enriching to also include the medium of a political-historical guided city tour to convey to the participants a deeper perspective of Brussels as the

“capital of Europe”, as well as to provide an initial insight into Belgium’s (and hence Europe’s) lively past and present, as represented in Brussels’s cityscape. The traces of Flemish, Habsburg (Austrian and Spanish), French, monarchist-dynastic and revolutionary and more recently democratic history can be sketched (Arblaster, 2012), as well as Belgium’s colonial past herself with regard to the Congo (Hochschild, 1999). For a more contemporary perspective (Humes, 2014) the changing construction and face of the Belgian Federal state and the complex system of devolved regions (such as the Brussels metropolitan one) and the language communities in Belgium (for Brussels especially the Flemish and Francophone ones) can be introduced, with the tensions – in particular financial – between the Flemish and Walloon regions (Brans & De Winter, 2013; Deschouwer, 2012). Thus this addition to the core programme is an insightful bonus to the EU dominated core programme of the *in-situ* seminar.

To Experience the EU *in situ*: a concluding reflection

Educational political excursions to Brussels can be a very important and successful method of creating a civic education learning and engagement platform regarding the EU. From our experience their true potential and effect can be realised especially if they are designed and implemented as an *in-situ* seminar - in the format which is presented by us in the above form – that is, with the design and practice principles of exemplary (through one selected policy field), multi-perspective insights and as a seminar which uses the access to the key relevant institutions and select surrounding influencing players as a locational educational asset.

It is necessary to emphasise, though, that the concept we have presented above is not only very stimulating and supportive with regards to the key tenets and aims of civic education, but also demanding for all concerned. The planning and execution of such an *in-situ* seminar is very labour and time intensive and requires some experience (which can be learned with shadowing, team training and experience, however). It is not an off-the-shelf, easily routinised and streamlined format that can be replicated without much efforts in an efficient way as some providers may think it should be for economies of replication. Such *in-situ* seminars require a planning time frame of a minimum of 6 months between the determination of the date and the theme until the actual seminar, and in principle require a high degree of experience and expertise. It is in the very nature and philosophy of the approach and concept we presented above that no *in-situ* seminar is the same. Rather, each *in-situ* seminar should be tailored: title and theme are freshly decided on, the supporting material for the thematic introduction must be continuously sourced and adapted, the speakers of the core EU institutions are rarely the same, and the detailed programme content is constantly changing.

Also, we should emphasise the intensity of the *in-situ* seminar. In addition to the formal criteria for a minimum number of formal hours of educational activity in the programme in order to receive public subsidy, the design logic - for content and didactic reasons – mandates a multi-perspective dimension of triangulating the insight between several core EU institutions, 3 at the minimum as explained above, as well as the necessary phases of preparation and reflection post-meetings. This means that time during the *in-situ* seminar is a critical resource, which must be carefully harnessed but also invested in (resulting in long days, with early starts). From the participant's side, it is often commented on that there is not a lot of "down time" between programme points – though lunch and dinner can and is being used informally by participants for group processes) and for recreation. These *in-situ* seminars therefore are presented with the challenge of meeting the central didactic aims despite a (normally) quite tight time frame of 4 days, without being seen / experienced by participants as too compressed or demanding.

In terms of cooperation with civic education providers and pre-organised groups (schools, universities etc.) one must also take into account that – in Germany at least – only those seminars can be assisted with public subsidies where the participation is formally voluntary and cross-class / courses and where it is not part of the formal education timetable of those institutions for those learners.

To conclude, it can be stated from experience that the success of each and every *in-situ* EU seminar is conditional on the seminar team as well as the participants / learners themselves. The seminar team which plans and implements the seminar should be in possession of the requisite organisational, subject and methodological competencies. The participants / learners should be interested in the content, motivated and willing participation in an engaged manner. Last not least, EU institution representative and external experts which not only competent in their domain and field, but also sufficiently open and prepared for discussion and debate. Clear and informative arrangements beforehand – planned by the seminar team with communications with the speakers so that the topics are more clearly defined and that the general characteristics of the group and the expected *modus operandi* is known to them – but also the participants (including by a detailed seminar programme a predatory tailored material) – are positive factors for the overall success in preparing a platform for a civic education / political excursion to the EU in the presented format, in which deeper and more lasting learning processes can be initiated.

What we are presenting here is an additional approach and offer, not as a replacing alternative to more commonplace didactic methods in EU-focussed civic education. This addition, however, can substantially contribute to make EU

policy making more comprehensive to learners in its multi-dimensional nature, complexity, currency and relevance. Especially if planned and conducted as outlined above, this can promote three core objectives of civic education: to extend knowledge, to develop judgement formation and to encourage participation.

To close with the words of one participant: “Before the seminar the EU was a white sheet of paper for me, which did not really interest me. Through this seminar, the picture became much clearer for me. The EU has moved closer to me. And it has become much more apparent to me how important the EU is – because the EU [Europe] is our future.” (Participant feedback, Brussels, December 2013). Regardless of quite what the future of the EU is going to be or what our preferences may be (Dinan, Nugent, & Paterson, eds, 2017; Nugent, 2017; Guérot, 2016; Ryner & Cafruny, 2016; Olsen & McCormick, 2016; Ranacher, Staudigl, & Frischhut, Eds., 2015; McCormick, 2015; McCormick, 2013; McCormick, 2006), it should be of interest to all of us.

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